

The Circuit Writer



NEWSLETTER OF THE COMMISSION ON ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

Northern New Jersey Conference, The United Methodist Church

Spring 1977 - Number 9

ABOUT NEW JERSEY METHODISM:

Jonathan T. Crane and His Farewell to Lincoln

By Dr. Robert Drew Simpson

Recently a sermon was retrieved from the Drew University Archives. Ordinarily such sermons would be better left on file. But this sermon is unusual. It is a manuscript copy of the sermon the Rev. Jonathan Townley Crane preached at the time of Abraham Lincoln's assassination. As a matter of fact, it may be the only extant Lincoln memorial sermon preached in our Newark Annual Conference in those troubled days. But as interesting as the sermon is its author was one of the outstanding preachers of our Conference and a socially concerned author of some dimension. A prolific writer, he focused his Christian conviction upon the kinds of social evils which, in the Christian mind of those times, degraded and destroyed youth and older ones alike. Dancing, popular amusements, and the abuse of alcohol were but a few of the subjects he examined in print. In 1853 he wrote The Practical Lectures on the Decalogue, followed by Methodism and Its Methods, and another on holiness. Much of the material was directed toward protecting youth, for Crane was Principal of Pennington Seminary, Pennington, New Jersey, for nine years. Those who know him spoke of his gentle, hopeful, cheerful manner as an educator, but his theology knew no compromise. As the memorial in the Conference Journal states: "He never glossed over the more unwelcome parts of our firm theology, but preached the great need of regeneration, and the certain punishment of the wicked. . . ."

As the threat of Civil War loomed in the land, Crane delivered and published a sermon on slavery. A thoughtful sensitive person, Crane nonetheless did what probably many were doing; in his sermon he counseled against war and questioned the wisdom of freeing four million slaves. He even suggested that allowing blacks to remain in temporary servitude would be preferable to war and social upheaval. This sermon was preached in Jersey City in 1860. Apparently Crane did not change his mind significantly, for his sermon four years later extolling Lincoln's greatness makes no mention whatever of slavery or emancipation. Interesting it is that Crane, as was rather typical of his time, could belabor some of the personal vices such as dancing as evil, but couldn't call slavery by its right name.

In the light of this typically narrow view of social evil, (a view which some might call hypocritical), it is especially interesting that one of Jonathan Crane's sons was the illustrious American author, Stephen Crane. Stephen was only 9 years old when his father died in 1880 while serving the Drew Methodist Episcopal Church in Port Jervis, New York. But one wonders about the impact of father upon son. We know that the kinds of concerns Stephen wrote about - the horror of war as seen through the eyes of a young soldier, in The Red Badge of Courage; the degradation and brutalization of life in the slums, Maggie, Girl of the Streets; the cruel treatment of blacks by the "respectable people" of a small town, in The Monster - all reflect a profound psychological insight into human nature and a sensitivity for people who are hurting. Yet for all of this, in his brief life (1871-1900) Stephen lived in full flight from the church and from images of an overbearing, tyrannical God. We know his father's death had deep effect upon him; we know that he struggled with troublesome

theological and parental images, as reflected in his writings and poetry. But if he heard his father's sermons and read his books, Stephen was more affected by the basic thrust of the Christian message than by the narrow interpretations of his day, interpretations which led to some rather hypocritical blindness toward the forces that were destroying lives.

Jonathan T. Crane himself came up through hardship. Born June 19, 1819, at Connecticut Farms near Elizabeth, New Jersey, he was orphaned at age 13. He made his way to neighboring New Providence where he was converted to Methodism from his Presbyterian heritage. After graduation from Princeton College in 1843, he entered the ranks of the Methodist itinerants. Except for his nine-year term as Presiding Elder, he did the usual one or two year stints at several churches: the Asbury Circuit, Staten Island, Hope, Belvidere, Orange, Jersey City, Haverstraw, Morristown, Hackettstown, Paterson, and finally, Port Jervis, where he died.

It was while in Morristown, N.J. that Jonathan T. Crane preached his sermon about Lincoln, a few days after the assassination. It was published December 10, 1864, in The Jerseyman, the local Morristown newspaper. The manuscript sermon is 32 pages long. It captures the agonizing mood of the time and reflects the appreciation Crane and many in our nation had for Lincoln. Written in the embellished style of the day, it is still unusually direct and forthright. A few excerpts will reflect the thrust of his thought. After quoting his text II Samuel 3:38, Crane moved dramatically to his subject.

Abraham Lincoln is dead. His great heart, so warm with the fires of patriotism, so full of generous kindness for even his enemies, beats no more. And like him who wept at the warrior's grave in Hebron, we lament the way in which death came to him whom we deplore. It was not in the shock of battle, where the earth is piled with the slain and the air is thick with dying groans. It was not when traversing the lines of the Army of the Potomac, he ventured too near the foe and tempted the bullet of the keen eyed rifleman. He fell in an hour of peace, sitting among his friends, who would gladly have placed their own hearts between him and the weapon aimed at his life. He falls by a sudden wound which leaves him no lucid moment to bid those whom he loved farewell, or breathe one word of prayer, or give one glance into the eternity he was entering. He fell, too in a memorable hour. He saw the counsels of the rebel conspirators confounded, and their power broken. It was given him to enter the rebel capital and receive the joyous greetings of Southern patriots who had lived and suffered in silence under the iron rule of traitors. He lives to see a nation's joy over returning peace and unity and to show, by generous words and deeds, how void of passion was his heart toward the enemies who were even then plotting his death.

Seeing in Lincoln a champion of freedom, his words paint an idealistic picture of the United States in those traumatic days.

He was placed at the head of a people yet in its early youth, but which gives token of colossal power in the not distant future. Here on these Western shores, if we are true to our God, our principles and ourselves, shall henceforth dwell an empire of liberty and equal rights, able to speak as one having authority among the nations of the earth. Hither shall the oppressed of all lands flee from tyranny and wrong, and among our broad plains and fruitful hills

find peace and rest. And this free intelligent people once and again chose Abraham Lincoln to bear at the head of their advancing hosts, the banner of the world's progress, the bright emblem of constitutional liberty.

The second section of Crane's sermon offers an unusually vivid view of the prelude to the Civil War.

Abraham Lincoln was called to the helm of state in a time of peril and alarm, which demanded great wisdom and skill in the administration of public affairs. Before he even reached Washington City to begin his official duties, seven states of the Union were in open rebellion; their constitution had been formed, their president had been elected and inaugurated; forts, arsenals, custom houses and all kinds of property belonging to the general government had been seized and war was virtually begun. The powers of darkness were every where at work. There was treason in every department of the capitol, treason in the army, treason in the navy, treason in high places and low places, from the perjured Senator of a State, down to the poorest government clerk who with meek face plied his pen by day at his allotted desk and by night acted as spy for the enemies of his country. A traitor Secretary of the Navy had scattered our fleet in distant seas; a traitor Secretary of War had stripped northern arsenals to arm the South. A secret organization, compact and complete in all its parts and needing only weapons to make it an army, lay coiled, like a serpent for the fatal spring, and winding its scaly length through all the South from Baltimore to Galveston. Traitors at the North, too, secretly in the pay of the conspirators, were busy with voice and pen, and for the sake of Southern gold, the price of infamy, laboring with unholy zeal to place the nation helpless at the feet of the foe. The counsels of the President and his cabinet were divulged to the enemy as soon as they were formed, none knew by whom and doubt and distrust were well nigh universal. Many hearts failed with fear and to the eyes of multitudes, naught remained of the golden chain of our Union save the broken, scattered links. Gloom akin to despair gathered over the country. The Mayor of New York, in a formal message, assured the citizens that the Union was gone and proposed that the city secede from the State as well as the Union, and set up an independent sovereignty. And the governor of our own State published a letter in which he argued that the nation was falling to pieces and that the interests of New Jersey would best be subserved by abandoning the ruins of the old Union and joining the Southern conspirators. Thus the ship of State with her banner of stars torn to shreds with fire in the hold and mutiny among the crew drove upon the rocks, while throughout the world, good men looked on with tears, and tyrants exulted and laid their plans to plunder the wreck.

As the sermon moves through appraisal of Lincoln's contribution, Crane underscores the Divine implications of his work.

Abraham Lincoln lived to accomplish a great work. We cannot but believe that God assigned him a mission for the good of the nation and the world, nor suffered him to fall, till the

end was at hand. We would not be premature in our rejoicing over the restoration of the Union and the return of peace, yet it is evident that the power of the rebellion is broken. The armies of the conspiracy are beaten and scattered. . . Nevertheless, the sky is growing clear about us and bright with coming peace. And we honor Abraham Lincoln as the instrument in the hands of God of accomplishing all this. He fell suddenly, in the hour of the nation's joy; but his work was done, and well done. And even in this dark hour of sorrow, all is not dark. . . We thank God that he was spared to see the rebellion wounded unto death, and sinking to the dust in its infamy.

Finally, after describing the love of the people for Lincoln, his sermon reaches its climax as he calls for vengeance against the assassins, on the one hand, and bids farewell to Lincoln on the other.

I would not interpose in behalf of his assassins, to ask for them a clemency to which they have no right. So foul a deed, so cowardly a murder, so enormous a wrong done to a nation struggling for its very life, so enormous a wrong done to the whole world, renders mercy almost a crime. Let them die the death which they so richly merit. "Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath for it was cruel." Let every man who has had but the tip of his finger in the horrid plot, share the fate of the main actors in the tragedy and sink with them to everlasting infamy. But let no blind vengeance smite the innocent with the guilty. Let no sudden fury prolong one day longer than justice and necessity demand, a war which has left so many hearts and homes desolate.

Farewell, Abraham Lincoln, noblest of patriot martyrs, truest of men. Thou wast sent of God to do a great work and thy work is done. The bloody hands of wicked men never interrupted more generous designs, nor dismissed from its earthly tenement a nobler spirit, than thine. Bitter is the hour that takes thee from us. "As a man fallest before wicked men, so fellest thou." Reverently we lay thee down by the side of Washington and Jefferson and Hamilton and the fathers of the Republic. With many tears we deplore thee, and hide thy name tenderly in our hands over thy gory form, and lifting our eyes to the throne of Him in whom is all our trust, we once again pledge "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor," that this land, this nation, in whose cause thou wast slain, shall be one, the abode of law and order, and equal rights, and the home of the free.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL DINNER MEETING

Tuesday May 10, 1977, 7:00 P.M.

Chatham United Methodist Church, 460 Main Street, Chatham, N.J. \$5.25 per person

Speaker: Dean James Kirby, The Theological School, Drew University

"Dearest Ellen: Northern Methodism's Civil War Bishop's
love letters to his wife"

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LOCAL CHURCH RECORDS PROJECT

In order to encourage the gathering and preservation of local church records the Conference Commission is launching a microfilming project for local churches. Expenses would be shared equally between the local church and the Conference Commission. Microfilming would be done at cost by Drew University Library.

Each local church is encouraged to form a Records and History Committee and to begin to gather together from attics and basements, closets and trunks, all available official records (membership, baptisms, marriages, burials, etc.) along with minutes of the most important boards and committees (Administrative Boards, Trustees, United Methodist Women, United Methodist Men, Youth Fellowships and their predecessor groups).

A master microfilm file would be maintained in the Conference Archives at Drew. Physical copies may be returned to the local church or be placed on deposit with the Conference Archives as desired. Contact President Paul Splecker for details.

LOCAL CHURCH HISTORY CONTEST - Awards to be presented during 1977 Conference

Five local churches--Frenchtown, Kenilworth, Port Morris, Stockholm and West Portal--have submitted histories of their churches published during the calendar year 1976 for our fourth annual LOCAL CHURCH HISTORY RECOGNITION CONTEST. Two awards will be presented during the 1977 meeting of the Conference in June.

If your church plans to publish a history of your local church in 1977, we urge you to enter it in next year's contest. Large or small, pamphlet or hard-bound, mimeographed or printed, all histories produced during 1977 are eligible. Each history will become part of the Conference's permanent collection. MAIL ONE COPY TO: Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe, Drew University Library, Madison, New Jersey 07940 by February 1, 1978.

TRAVELING EXHIBIT ON BISHOP FRANCIS ASBURY

A small exhibit of Asbury memorabilia from the collection of Drew University is available on request for use at special celebrations in local churches. The exhibit includes several mounted prints and photographs, a set of ordination certificates signed by our first Bishop, along with a pair of spectacles he wore. When used with historical items from a local congregation, this makes an attractive addition to an anniversary or other historical observation. Contact Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe, Drew University Library, Madison, N.J. 07940, 377-3000, Ext. 243.

CELEBRATING THE HERITAGE

BELVIDERE Members and friends gathered October 17 for a celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Belvidere Church. Participating in the worship and celebration were Bishop C. Dale White, the Rev. Clark Hunt, the Rev. E. Bruce Wills, and the present pastor of the church, the Rev. William Noll. Bishop White preached at the 11 A.M. homecoming worship service. The Belvidere church had its beginnings in the Wesley Chapel, which was organized in 1826. This was the first house of worship in Belvidere and the fourth in Warren County. Circuit riders from the Philadelphia Conference served the "little church on the hill" until 1840, when the first regularly appointed pastor began his duties. By this time the New Jersey Conference had been organized and Belvidere was one of its northern-most outposts. The October 17 event was the culmination of a year of events which have highlighted the historical heritage of the church.

CELEBRATING THE HERITAGE - continued

JERSEY CITY The Rev. Josiah Hornblower led in building a small frame chapel to house a sturdy band of Methodists here in 1811. Figuratively speaking, more than 200 urban United Methodists were happily blowing the horn in celebration of their church's colorful heritage. The joyous event was held January 23 in Clair Memorial Church. It was arranged through the New Jersey-Bayonne Group Ministry. Participating, besides people from the host church, were members of Trinity, Church of the Covenant and Christ Churches in Jersey City and Wesley Church, Bayonne. The program included much hymn-singing, a series of historical skits and presentations on the history of the congregations, a formal worship service of thanksgiving, and a festive supper.

TEANECK On October 31, 1976, Teaneck United Methodists and friends celebrated the national bicentennial and their church's 75th birthday. Dr. Joseph Blessing returned to preach at the morning service and Mrs. Alfred Willett, widow of a former pastor, was also present. A luncheon followed with hearty reminiscences of the tradition of Teaneck Methodism. A large historical display of pictures, programs and other memorabilia decorated Scudder Hall. The Church was originally built as a community house, and was organized through the efforts of Daniel Bogert, Elmer Mabie and Dr. Blauvelt in 1901. A new 75th anniversary history of the church prepared by Mrs. Elsie Bogert was distributed.

OTHERS? CELEBRATING THE HERITAGE is a regular column in our newsletter. Won't you share your plans or report on historic celebrations in your church? Please contact the editor and give us your story!

RETIRED PASTORS

Have you made your tape of reminiscences and your very best sermon for the Conference Archives? If not, contact Paul Spiecker, Hawthorne, for details. Phone: 427-0725.

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Revised 3/7/77